

Cordell “Jeff” Jefferson Longshoreman

Meet Cordell “Jeff” Jefferson

My name is Cordell Jefferson. I’m a TR Inspector, and that TR Inspector covers container repair. I’m a container repairman in 1429, Local 1429. I come from Pigtown, where your stadium is at, the Raven Stadium and the baseball. I actually lived down on the block call Austin Street in a two bedroom house with five other brothers. And I wanted out and I started young. But there was no computers, fellows. Dig what I am saying to you now. I said “How do I get out!” And what did I start doing? I started working on containers, started going to school ... would not give up school. I even failed twice in school, I want you to know this, but I wouldn’t quit. I was twenty years old when I graduated, alright. Don’t let nobody knock you! All my brothers and sisters were smarter than me but I made more money then them, because I got a job that I landed here on the waterfront, the best thing that ever happened to me in my life.

Explain what you do. Talk about an average day at work for you.

I’m a TR Inspector and I’m looking for a routing card. [A] routing card is punched out by the computer. First thing that I’m going to do is read this card, make sure that number is right, making sure everything match in that routing number, punch it in. Then I’m going into my inspection mode. My inspection mode is, I’m going around checking for damage, looking for something that is wrong. Thank God, if it’s clean, if it’s good, I don’t have to do nothing. But if it is, that’s when I got to go to work... start punching a lot of keys and the only time I do write, I write with a piece of keel, and I write on the back of the door, punch it in, it’s damaged and that would warn somebody, watch this section here, if it gives or something. We’re looking for damages, making sure the cargo that is coming in is going to be ship-worthy because if it is a break, if it’s not right, you’re talking about a lot of man power getting killed or getting hurt. Me personally, from the time I’ve been here, none of my cargo broke, nobody got hurt and that’s my job. My job is the entry point. Without the entry point, you don’t have no cargo to go to ships.

Why did you choose this career? What about it appealed to you?

I’m God-gifted as a cabinet maker, okay. I can build cabinets. I can build any kind of cabinet, any kind of structure. What is a cabinet? Four sides, a bottom, a top. What is my babies down here? My babies are containers. I love my babies. My babies .. I treat them just like I treat my wood in a wood shop. I want to bring them back. If they’re hurt, I got to repair them.

What personality traits or interests can be a good match for this career?

Anybody got any kind of inkling of mechanics, ... and love using their hands ... it’s just like being a carpenter or sculptor or building a mosaic. This is a big block... You can

look at these containers and say, “It’s a big block of wood or big block of marble and I’m going to carve this, to make it the way it is supposed to be.”

What parts of your education do you use most often in this career?

Stick with math ... if you’re young and you’re coming out of school. The waterfront is really geometry, that’s all it is. It’s based on geometry, (you know), a lot of lines, angles, lifting cargo is based on geometry. Even loading the ship, weight, distributing weight and all, your math is going to be the best tool if you’re getting out of school. If you’re good in math, you going to have a good opportunity. Learn a foreign language because you’re meeting different people. The waterfront is a United Nations, because you’re meeting different kind of people, all over the world. From India to China, to Korea, anywhere you look around, you know it’s good to pick up a language because you’ll never know when you’ll need it.

What has been the career track that’s gotten you from your first job to where you are now? What special degrees or licenses did you need to get along the way?

We got a thing called seniority. For thirty-three years, I’m number two around here, in my whole local. Each step you make, with your seniority, is going to put you in a position. Just like I started in container repair. In about nine years, I was a foreman. And I stayed as a foreman about twenty years on this waterfront. Your seniority will push you into levels of livelihood, lifestyle, money.

What is the best part of your career?

When you come to work everyday, it’s something different. Something is absolutely, ... some people would say, “WHAT! How am I going to pull this off? How am I going to do this”? You improvise, you start doing things. Technology, that’s what ... all eight of us would come around, “How we going to do this”?

How has your work changed over the years? What role has technology played in those changes?

When we first came in here with the skills we had, we had to use bull work. That means you had to use your muscles. You had to use a lot of hand labor, thirty-three years ago. Now we have equipment, heavy equipment that would pick things up, forklifts, top loaders, fifth wheels, that is even ten times greater at moving cargo. Now the computer age has taken over. When I first started on the TR line, I was pushing a pencil and a piece of paper. I haven’t seen a piece of paper in over ten years. Computerization, we’re computerized.

How does your work fit into the larger framework of the work at the Port?

I'm talking about me as a longshoreman, cargo coming in at the front gate, cargo got to meet a ship. I am the first on hand to bring that cargo in, as a longshoreman. I'm inspecting. I am checking. I am making sure this cargo is right to get through. It's basically ... like you would see a Hertz Rental, place you bring your car back there, they inspect the car, when you come back. That's what I am, an inspector and I'm not inspecting a car but I'm inspecting containers, cargo going to a ship. This is our part. I am not a stevedore, you know, the stevedore is a different class all by itself. These are the ship workers. Okay, these ship workers load the cargo, lash it down to the ship. Your terminology, look at a building that's being built, and as it is stacking. We take containers and stack, and these are stevedores, they're stacking containers and locking them together where they take the long voyage across the water. With the stevedore (now I'm going to give you a little insight about the checkers) now the checkers is right beside that stevedore, checking that cargo as it is going to a different country. Checkers that knows where to put all of the weight, each weight to make a distributed on a ship even). The stevedore loading it, the checker is checking it; longshoreman is inspecting it.

What advice would you have for anyone who wants to have the kind of career you have?

You have a better chance than I had, to come to the waterfront because now you can go to the website. The website will tell you everything you need, ... breakdown, technology. There is a job for each and every person on the face of this earth, especially down here on the waterfront. Coming down here, you will be trained for this job. Any job that you go into, I don't care if it's container repair, fifth wheeler, top loader, computerize, whatever, whatever we got here, they got schools, and we are training the guys, we're being trained all the time.